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ABSTRACT

Volunteers and voluntary organizations are crucial to the literacy effort throughout the world. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are ideal channels for direct involvement of the people in literacy efforts. NGOs often directly carry out the teaching of reading, writing, and numeracy programs; government efforts usually involve such organizations. Voluntary action in the field of literacy appears to have a maximum effect in three kinds of situation: (1) when an NGO is inspired by the exceptional dynamism of an individual and when the team of volunteers who work directly under the supervision of such a personality follows his/her example; (2) when a government demonstrates its political will by launching a national campaign involving the community of NGOs; and (3) when volunteers combine economic activity with literacy activities. Any substantial reduction of illiteracy is possible only when there is close collaboration between official, formal structures and the people's involvement through voluntary participation. Similarly, the quality of the work can only be satisfactory when there is a link between volunteers and professionals. Volunteers are required to have high skill levels and should be regarded as professionals. They should receive training, and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization is able to offer such assistance. (KC)

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LITERACY LESSONS

INTERNATIONAL LITERACY YEAR

The contribution of volunteers to literacy work

by Rao Chelikani
and Rahat Nabi Khan

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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INTRODUCTION

Literacy is the foundation of all education, and education for all is now unanimously recognized as a fundamental human right in the declared policies of governments, as well as in the programmes announced by the organizations of the United Nations System.

The role of voluntary organizations – and of volunteers – in this basic educational activity is crucial due to the magnitude of the problem. While governments and international organizations have long recognized their roles in attaining universal literacy, there must be a further realization that voluntary participation in literacy work should not be considered as 'peripheral', but as central and the very core of the programme.

As far as literacy teaching is concerned, the major contribution must come from local, national and regional voluntary organizations. International voluntary associations can only provide financial, administrative or technical support for local and national efforts. This is because most literacy programmes are conducted in the national language. Where literacy in a foreign language is required, foreign volunteers may have a role to play, but such programmes represent a small part of the whole. Nevertheless, national and international synergy is needed to propel literacy forward on a larger scale, and to act as a catalyst at the local level.

A FRAMEWORK FOR VOLUNTARY ACTION

Voluntary action for literacy work is the individual's:

- *Expression of moral or religious convictions*, a desire for social recognition, human solidarity or simply contributing towards the achievement of social justice.
- *Contribution through individual moral and psychological satisfaction*, where these are more important than financial reward. In other words, volunteers work for less than the current pay for the job.

A non-governmental organization (NGO) is an ideal channel for direct involvement of the people. The goals of some NGOs may coincide with those of the government, such as national development and literacy. In the field of literacy, the social problem of the so-called 'left-outs' and 'drop-outs' concerns both governments and NGOs. Co-operation between governments and NGOs must be based on complementary roles.

From the earliest efforts to overcome illiteracy, responsibility for literacy work has seldom – if ever – been the sole preserve of governments. On the whole, since the Second World War NGOs have played increasingly important and varied roles in the world's efforts to eliminate illiteracy. Indeed, it would be most unusual nowadays for a government to attempt any serious and far-ranging literacy work without enlisting the ideas, dynamism and resources of NGOs.

Perhaps the best known form of NGO participation in literacy work is that of *directly carrying out the teaching of reading, writing and numeracy programmes*, either (a) on their own initiative and under their own responsibility or (b) as part of a joint effort involving NGO participation in government-led activities.

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Less well known, because they attract less publicity, are contributions made by NGOs behind the 'front lines' of actual literacy work. NGOs can, for example, play a crucial part in *informing and mobilizing public opinion* in favour of literacy. This is an integral part of building up the political will, without which most literacy campaigns are doomed to failure.

HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF VOLUNTEERS

Many volunteers who participate in developmental activities every year may only go for a short period, perhaps less than three weeks, in which case their work mainly involves promotional campaigns for public awareness and symbolic actions contributing to a sense of international solidarity. People who are available for around six months are called medium-term volunteers, while those who spend one to three years in service are known as long-term volunteers. The vast majority of short-term volunteers come from the same country or the same region as the project, while medium- and long-term volunteers cross continents to express their international solidarity. They are often involved in building accommodation, developing teaching materials or post-literacy reading materials, and their participation in vocational training forms part of their own adult education. Women and girls seem to volunteer in larger numbers than their male counter-parts, whether in the same country or outside it. The number of women is especially high in short-term activities.

TESTIMONIALS

The International Reading Association Literacy Award was conferred on the **National Literacy Plan of Argentina** *for making effective use of radio broadcasts to provide instruction to those living in remote areas and for establishing workshops in literacy and vocational skills for school drop-outs.*

Bharat Sevak Samaj *and* **Gandhi Seva Ashram Amiti** *in India have been linking literacy teaching with the establishment of new forms of production, such as co-operatives in agriculture, handicrafts and small-scale industries.* **The Indian Institute of Youth Welfare** *in Nagpur formed a co-operative of women who meet every day: they spend half of their time procuring chillies which are dried, ground and packed, and they are also responsible for writing labels, marketing, writing bills and maintaining accounts. The remainder of their time is used for learning skills that will directly strengthen their capacity to manage the co-operative.*

In the United Kingdom in 1983, with the help of a development grant from the **Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit,** *the foundations were laid for literacy and numeracy classes, a wood workshop, sewing evenings and a training building-site. Since that time, 326 adult participants have been involved as students, helpers and creators of a programme aimed at those with minimal skills.*

The literacy programme for slum children in Bangladesh, since its introduction in August 1985, has now produced the most remarkable results. This programme, destined for children born in the slums with no access to any kind of literacy programme, has brought together a large number of slum children in five centres. Each centre is run by members of the **Bangladesh Workcamps Association.** *This is a cost-free programme where books, paper and other educational essentials have been provided free of charge. About 450 students graduate each year who, as well as speaking correctly, are qualified to read and write in their national language.*

Taken from the *Newsletter* of the Co-ordinating Committee for International Voluntary Service.

Voluntary action in the field of literacy appears to have a maximum effect in three kinds of situation:

- When an NGO is inspired by the exceptional dynamism of an individual and when the team of volunteers who work directly under the supervision of such a personality follows his/her example.
- When a government demonstrates its political will by launching a national campaign involving the community of NGOs.
- When volunteers combine economic activity – such as earning money or learning economically useful skills – with literacy activities.

It is evident that any substantial reduction of illiteracy is possible only when there is close collaboration between official, formal structures and the people's involvement through voluntary participation. Similarly, the quality of the work can only be satisfactory when there is a link between the volunteer and the professional. While attracting volunteers, an NGO should have literacy professionals to guide them in their work and to give them support as permanent staff or consultants. These professionals should include teachers, journalists, librarians and civil servants, whether retired or not.

At present, inter-governmental resources are channelled towards various literacy programmes through international NGOs, who are consulted on the planning and implementation of these programmes. In the future, it is hoped that they will also be associated with their evaluation.

The involvement of NGOs in national campaigns has often been an essential condition for their success. In particularly difficult conditions, such as in tribal areas and in rural women's literacy programmes where it

was necessary to use the vernacular language, NGOs have sometimes been more successful than many governments.

The International Literacy Year presents a unique opportunity for NGO action at the international level, while the long-term programme of Unesco for the eradication of illiteracy, and particularly the Charter to be adopted at the World Conference on Education for All (Jomtien, Thailand, March 1990), represent a framework for action.

NGO ACTION FOR LITERACY AT THE REGIONAL LEVEL

Given the strength of NGOs at the grass-roots level, co-operation between NGOs operating in different geographical areas would be an important element in the success of literacy programmes.

Agneta Lind and Anton Johnston have described the role of NGOs in their study of the Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA): 'Starting out on the basis of community organizations which combine organizational with educational work, the trend has been to grow towards the creation of a broad popular front of community-rooted organizations which struggle collectively against the general structures of oppression while maintaining particular community-interest issues high on each organization's agenda. Within "popular education", literacy work may form part of the activities.'

'The probable explanation for the relative successes of NGOs in literacy, post-literacy and in popular education in general lies in the rooting of NGOs in some form of cohesive community (members, class, gender, church-goers, etc.)'

Lind, Agneta; Johnston, Anton. *Adult literacy in the Third World.* Stockholm, SIDA, 1986. 101, 11 p.

To create the desired motivation to learn and to link learning with the needs and aspirations of the people is the basic contribution of the volunteers. Many of them undertake activities which generate income and may even create part-time employment for the learners. They may provide learning opportunities for those whose needs are as simple as reading traffic signals, warnings on electrical appliances, menus, cinema posters, etc.

NGOs also have a crucial role in the development of self-reliance among local communities. One dimension of this self-reliance which NGOs effectively promote in the learner is the attitude of participation in his own development as a literate person. NGOs involve the learner in the whole process of literacy work, realizing that illiteracy is not an isolated problem but an integral part of the social system and, hence, requires a broad, interdisciplinary approach. Literacy, therefore, should form part of the general educational strategy of a society in which the acquisition of basic skills should be a permanent and continuing process.

NGO ROLE AT THE INTERNATIONAL LEVEL

Many NGOs affiliated to various agencies of the United Nations System include literacy as one dimension of their activities. Furthermore, under the auspices of such agencies (as in the case of Unesco), NGOs meet together and contribute to the planning and execution of that agency's programmes. They also undertake joint projects among themselves. A group of leading NGOs have formed an International Task Force on Literacy (ITFL) to further the goals of International Literacy Year – 1990 (ILY). The principal purposes of

ITFL are to mobilize non-governmental organizations, to stimulate their active co-operation in the planning and implementation of ILY activities, and to promote public awareness of literacy as a need and a right. A special objective of the ITFL is to ensure that ILY does in fact result in long-term concrete measures to eradicate illiteracy.

THE INTERNATIONAL TASK FORCE ON LITERACY

Four major elements of strategy were decided by the task-force members at a meeting in Berlin in 1988:

- *Creating public awareness by producing an information kit, special materials for learners, a song, a film, a world telethon;*
- *Creating and strengthening literacy structures by identifying existing groups, stimulating regional inventories, preparing directories of donor agencies, special efforts for women and girls, producing methodological guides for teachers;*
- *Stimulating a 'great debate' about literacy by promoting a discussion about the major issues of literacy at the grass-roots level, about how literacy is taught, why more women are illiterate than men, why more rural dwellers are illiterate than urban dwellers;*
- *Stimulating literacy research and evaluation, women's experiences with literacy around the world, providing training for research and evaluation, promoting seminars on participatory action research, collecting unpublished documents.*

The volunteer of today is not like the middle-class women of yesteryear who had plenty of time, a comfortable life and no money worries, and could, therefore, do unpaid voluntary work free of care. Today's volunteer, even if he or she comes from a relatively comfortable background, must look forward to some kind of career in order to avoid material discomfort or want.

Those who have been active in the international voluntary movement are familiar from personal experience with the immense potential that exists and could be mobilized for a decisive world-wide offensive against illiteracy. But, at present, this potential is not fully realized through the lack of adequate resources, mainly financial.

The resources of most organizations involved in voluntary work are meagre to say the least. The financial burden of sending a volunteer abroad falls either on the donor organization, the receiving organization or on the volunteer himself – or any combination of all three. Any glance at the final result of the balance struck will illustrate the paucity of the resources with which voluntary action has to contend. Such shoe-string operations are, of course, better than nothing, but it would be highly unrealistic to expect the international voluntary movement to make a dent in the mass of world illiteracy unless their 'shoe-string' programmes are given added resources, whether private or public, national or international.

A rough estimate of the necessary sum can be calculated from a publication prepared by the Co-ordinating Committee for International Voluntary Service (CCIVS) with the assistance of Unesco, *Volunteering for literacy, 1988/89*. This publication is intended for all

young people who want to volunteer to do literacy work, and provides information on the organizations active in this field in sixty countries throughout the world. The information is divided into sixteen categories, the last of which, 'Financial conditions of participation', includes the following provisions:

- Free board and lodging.
- Free transport within a country.
- Reimbursement of travel costs to the country.
- Pocket money.
- Reimbursement of registration fee paid by the volunteer to the voluntary organization.
- Accident insurance.
- Sickness insurance.
- Some contribution towards accommodation expenses incurred by the volunteer.

With the exception of the small registration fee paid, as evidence of seriousness of purpose and of firm intention on the part of the volunteer, we can immediately see from this list that, in fairness to the volunteer and in order not to impair his/her efficiency, these financial provisions represent the absolute minimum. It would be unfair if the whole or even a part of this financial burden were met by the volunteer.

Unfortunately, few organizations meet these very modest conditions.

It is easy to see that this failure to meet even the minimal financial conditions would seriously impair the attraction of these associations for volunteers, and thus an important part of the potential manpower is probably unused. At the human level, it is also clear that hardship to individuals should be avoided as far as possible, and the provision of accident and medical insurance, and the reimbursement of travel expenses would diminish this hardship.

The important point is that for a volunteer there are 'opportunity costs' involved, and a fair assessment of

the costs must be made if the voluntary movement is not to fall, unwittingly, into an ethically dubious situation.

It should not be difficult to set up machinery that would provide these very modest resources and thereby help those organizations which are unable to fulfil all of these conditions. This would greatly increase their efficiency as voluntary organizations and, at the same time, the impact of their volunteers on the various literacy programmes in which they participate.

THE VOLUNTEER: STATUS, SKILLS AND QUALIFICATIONS

What is the current status of the volunteer? It may come as a shock to learn that, internationally, the volunteer has no defined status. A worker and a student both have a recognized status, but it has frequently been a problem for the CCIVS that the same is not true of the volunteer. In the country towards which he/she is travelling, he/she has the status of neither a worker nor a student, whereas in his home country he/she would be either one or the other.

If it is to have a proper impact and produce the wider effects of service to the world community, mutual respect, understanding and peace amongst peoples and nations, voluntary work must be appreciated. But before the true value of voluntary work can be appreciated by public opinion, certain misconceptions concerning its nature must be removed.

It is, unfortunately, frequently assumed that voluntary work is 'easy'; it is fun and resembles a kind of holiday. In other words, it is not real work at all. This attitude strikes at the root of purposeful voluntary work. Despite what is sometimes believed, while volun-

tary work may be fun, it is seldom easy; usually, it is very hard work.

Many volunteers perform unskilled physical labour, such as building roads or schools. Some volunteers work in urban slums, in hospitals, with the physically and mentally handicapped, and with maladjusted or delinquent children. Such working environments could be expected to put any young person or adult under psychological stress. Volunteers perform this work free of charge – they should at least receive some recognition.

Although it is true that volunteers often perform unskilled physical labour, they also do jobs involving anything from simple to complicated skills. Particularly in the field of literacy, a certain level of education is necessary. The CCIVS booklet mentioned above also specifies for listed programmes the education and qualifications required, whether at primary, secondary or university level. In addition, other qualifications may be required.

If we glance at the type of work which is required of a literacy volunteer, it is clear that we are talking about highly skilled work. Who would argue that fund-raising does not require skills in public relations, indeed sophistication, to be successful? Establishing adequate communication with illiterates and neo-literates, motivating and guiding them, is difficult enough. It is a daunting task when combined with differences of age and social background between the teacher and the taught. Then it requires patience, commitment and a high level of maturity from a young volunteer, qualities which are not in abundant supply in the real world of today.

And this is not all. Literacy may form part of some other programme, or a post-literacy course may require teaching about health care, family planning, legal rights, vocational training or handicraft training. These require specialized knowledge, while communicating such knowledge requires skills of a high order.

Obviously volunteers in all these activities need training. No matter what the level of their previous education or experience, it is not likely to correspond to any of the available programmes. For this reason, various voluntary organizations provide training, and the CCIVS booklet indicates which programmes require potential volunteers to have completed what training. Each voluntary organization provides such training as it deems necessary. It would seem, at present, that there are no norms or standards for training: each organization goes its own way.

Given the areas of voluntary work and the skills needed, one could imagine that the adoption of norms and standards would be most helpful for the organizations in question. Those organizations which consider that they are handicapped in some way in reaching the desirable standard unassisted should be offered some kind of international assistance. Obviously Unesco is the organization best placed to offer such assistance, especially in the fields of literacy and post-literacy for adults.

The question of training and skills in voluntary work obviously highlights the paradox of the volunteer who is supposed to be an enthusiastic amateur yet needs professional skills to be effective. Once again, the question of the volunteer's status is raised. At present it appears that no fixed line can be drawn between 'amateur voluntary' work and 'professional' work requiring training and skills, unless, of course, both volunteers and their sponsors view their activities as that of enthusiastic 'do-gooders' from whom nothing effective can be and should be expected!

But when calls for volunteers are issued, the underlying assumption is that they can be and will be effective, and therefore highly 'professional' in the skills they deploy. These assumptions are, of course, contradictory. Unless a clearer definition reveals what the volunteer's role is, could be or ought to be, the voluntary effort cannot attain the levels needed for it to be effective.

A FUTURE DIRECTION

In the decade of the 1960s, when educational development became central to economic and social development, a great deal of work was done on the economics of education, much of it sponsored by the international organizations. Today, with our focus on literacy, and when a primary role is, hopefully, to be given to the voluntary movements, there appears to be a need for a study on the economics of voluntary work. Such knowledge would be extremely useful.

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